DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 197 849 PS 011 993

AUTHOR Johnson, Russell; And Others
TITLE Development of the Ability to Foresee Consequences of Inept Communications.
PUB DATE Sep 80
NOTE 19p.; Paper presented at the Annual Convention of the American Psychological Association (88th, Montreal, Quebec, Canada, September 1-5, 1980).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Adolescents; Age Differences; *Children; Communication Skills; *Comprehension; Difficulty Level; Elementary Education; *Emotional Response; *Maturity (Individuals); Questioning Techniques; Secondary Education; *Social Cognition; Social Development; Test Items
IDENTIFIERS *Developmental Patterns; Intent Structures

ABSTRACT

This study is an initial investigation of the effects of grade level, item content and type of probe on children's understanding of communicative ineptness. It was hypothesized that children's recognition and avoidance of inept communications would increase as a function of age and that recognition of ineptness would precede the ability to avoid ineptness. Twenty-four subjects in each of three grade levels (third, sixth and ninth) were interviewed with a scale consisting of 24 narrative vignettes in which the subject was required to imagine him/herself interacting with another child of the same age. Three types of vignettes were constructed: action vignettes reflected an actor's intention to get another person to engage in a desired activity; deflection vignettes portrayed an actor's intention to avoid an action desired by someone else; and feeling vignettes depicted an actor's intention to make another person feel good or better about something. Recognition of ineptness and improvement scores were obtained for each vignette. It was found that, especially at the third and sixth grade levels, feeling vignettes were more difficult for children to understand than were action and deflection vignettes. The expectation that recognition of ineptness would precede ability to improve on it was supported by the data, but this finding may have been an artifact of the assessment strategy. (Author/RH)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED197849

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH,
EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF
EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

Development of the Ability to Foresee Consequences of Inept Communications

Russell R. Johnson
George Peabody College for Teachers
of Vanderbilt University

Stephen Greenspan & Gwyn M. Brown
Boys Town Center for the
Study of Youth Development

Paper presented at the annual convention of
the American Psychological Association, Montreal,
September 1980.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Russell R. Johnson
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

PS011993

ABSTRACT

Seventy-two subjects (24 each at grades 3, 6, and 9) were asked to discuss the likely reactions of other children to inept interpersonal communications. Recognition that a communication may be offensive appears to develop before understanding of how to make such communications inoffensive. It was more difficult for children to recognize the ineptness of acts intended to help others than of acts intended to benefit oneself. The growth of "social foresight" (understanding that a given action may have negative interpersonal consequences) is discussed as an aspect of social-cognition development which may contribute to the acquisition of interpersonal competence in middle childhood and early adolescence.

Children's Ability to Recognize and Improve

Upon Socially Inept Communications

Although research interest in social-cognitive development proceeds at an impressive pace, concern has been expressed periodically over the failure to find strong correlations between measures of social cognition and actual social behavior of children (Mischel & Mischel, 1976; Shantz, 1975). Damon (1979) has suggested that this lack of predictive validity may result from the use of social cognition measures which are derived largely from methods used in studying purely cognitive processes. Youniss (1975, 1978) has urged social cognition researchers to develop measures which tap real-life processes used by children in getting along with others, rather than to use measures which tap relatively static trait ("What is the other like?") or state ("What is the other thinking/feeling?) judgments about others. The current study, which is an attempt to respond to these calls for more ecologically-valid measures of social-cognitive development, investigated the growth of children's understanding that certan social problem-solving strategies may be offensive to others.

The growth of this form of social understanding, while virtually unstudied by developmental researchers, would appear to have obvious implications for the ability of children to get along with others. For example, studies of socially rejected children with intellectual deficits (Bryan & Bryan, in press; Greenspan, 1979b, in press) shows that such children frequently "turn off" peers by making well-intended but inept comments. Bryan (1978) has given several examples of learning disabled adolescents who inadvertently offended peers and adults by asking such questions as, "Why is your coat so dirty?" or "Why do you have fat legs?"

Various authorities on the social adjustment of handicapped children have commented that such children often act as if they lack "social foresight," that is the ability to anticipate negative reactions of others to their behavior (Gallagher, 1957; Lerner, 1976; Lewis, Strauss & Lehtinen, 1960). Although such behavior has typically been attributed to a lack of impulse-control (Rutter, 1971), there is a growing awareness that for some children, inappropriate behavior may be due primarily to a lack of interpersonal awareness (Wiig & Semmel, 1976).

In light of the possibility that a lack of social foresight may contribute to the negative "social visibility" of some mentally handicapped youth (Leland, 1977), attainment of the ability to anticipate and thus avoid the consequences of inept communication would appear to be a developmental acquisition of great adaptive significance for all children and adolescents. Currently, however, there is a virtually complete absence of data addressing the development of social foresight, or its relationship to social behavior and adjustment. In one of the few studies even touching on this aspect of social-cognitive development, Platt, Spivack, Altman, Altman & Peizer (1974) included an "awareness of consequences" measure, in which adolescents were required to indicate the likely outcomes of interpersonal behaviors which transgressed against moral prohibitions (e.g., a football player who broke training rules to go to a party). That measure, while tapping to some extent a subject's level of social foresight, was obviously an index of awareness of consequences of "bad" rather than inept behaviors. Other measures of social problem-solving, which typically require a subject to generate solutions to interpersonal dilemmas involving the need to manipulate another's behavior (Clark & Delia, 1976; Shure & Spivack, 1979), are mainly concerned with the generation of adept responses and do not

specifically touch on the issue of concern to us, namely the ability to recognize, and thus avoid making, inept responses.

The current study is an initial investigation of the developmental course of the child's ability to recognize and avoid making socially inept communications. In approaching this problem, we reversed the typical procedure used in social problem-solving research. Instead of presenting subjects with hypothetical situations and asking them to generate solutions, we presented inept solutions to interpersonal dilemmas and asked subjects to evaluate the adequacy of these solutions. In particular, we asked subjects to anticipate the likely consequences of the solutions and to suggest alternative solutions which might be more adequate.

This study explored the role of grade level, item content and type of probe on children's understanding of communicative ineptness. Later studies will explore the relationship between this type of understanding and social adjustment of normal and developmentally disabled children and adolescents. It was hypothesized that understanding of inept communication would increase as a function of age, across middle childhood and early adolescence. Two types of understanding were assessed. The first type, referred to as "recognition of inept communications," involved the child's ability to predict accurately that inept communications would have negative interpersonal consequences. The second type, referred to as "improvement on inept communications," involved the child's ability to generate alternative communications which are less inept than those portrayed in the vignettes. In line with the hierarchy of social cognition variables proposed by Greenspan (1979a; in press), it was predicted that the improvement task (which Greenspan's model describes as a measure of "social communication") would prove more difficult than the recognition task (a measure of

"social sensitivity"). This prediction, that recognition of ineptness precedes ability to avoid ineptness, is analogous to the notion that receptive language develops before expressive language.

Finally, it was predicted that situational effects would be found, with item content mediating the relationship between grade and the two indices of communicative understanding. This prediction is suggested by the proliferating literature on "interactional psychology" (Endler & Magnusson, 1976; Pervin & Lewis, 1978), in which situational and personological variables are both equally emphasized. In the present study, it was predicted that vignettes in which the central actor is portrayed as ineptly carrying out a positively-intended action (such as cheering someone up) would be more difficult to understand than vignettes in which the central actor is portrayed as ineptly carrying out a negatively-intended action (such as getting out of a social obligation). This particular prediction is suggested by the large body of research which documents the weight given to intentions in making judgments about another person's actions (Keasey, 1977).

METHOD

Subjects

There were 72 children (37 males and 35 females) involved in the study, with 24 subjects in each of grades 3, 6, and 9. The subjects were obtained from three racially integrated, metropolitan Nashville public schools which were all lower-middle class in socioeconomic composition. An attempt was made to equalize the number of subjects for race and sex within each of the three grade levels. This goal was generally achieved with the exception of

the ninth grade sample, for which it proved difficult to obtain the participation of black males.

Procedure

Each subject was individually interviewed on a scale devised for this study. The interviewing was conducted by the second and third authors. Interviews were conducted during school hours in rooms isolated from regular classroom routines. Verbatim responses were recorded on the interview protocols. The interviews averaged approximately 45 minutes. All the protocols generated from this study were scored blindly by the second author. As a check on the reliability of the scoring system, a sub-sample of 25 students was randomly selected from the total sample of 72 protocols and scored by the third author. In order to obtain a measure of the temporal stability of the instrument, a sub-sample of 19 students, randomly selected, was retested 2 to 10 days after the initial interview.

Preceding the administration of the interview, the following set of instructions was read to each subject: "Sometimes we want to say something to someone, but we say it in a way that gets the other person mad, or hurts their feelings, even though we don't want to hurt their feelings, or get them mad. Has this ever happened to you? I'm going to read you some stories. In each story I want you to imagine yourself saying something to another kid. In some of the stories, the thing you say could get the other person angry or upset. In some of the stories, the thing you say may be perfectly fine. After I read you each story, I'll ask you to tell me if the thing you do is o.k. or if it would bother the other person. Than I'll ask you to say if you could think of some better way of saying or doing the thing in the story, that wouldn't get the other person upset. Remember,

there are no right or wrong answers to these stories; we're interested in what you think about them."

Description of Measure

The scale (which can be obtained from the first author) consists of 24 vignettes, in each of which the subject is to imagine him/herself as the target character, interacting with another child of the same age. There is a male and a female version of the scale; the only difference between the two is the use of male or female names for the other character portrayed in each vignette. In compiling each vignette, an attempt was made to have the target character (the one with whom the subject was asked to identify) inadvertently act in a matter which, in our opinion, would be viewed as offensive by most people. In constructing these vignettes, three content categories (referred to as "item types" in the analysis of the data) were used: eight vignettes were labelled "action" items, eight were labelled "deflection" items, while eight were labelled "feeling" items. These terms refer to the target of the inept actor's intentions. In the case of "action" items, the actor intended to get the other person to engage in some desired action. In the case of "deflection" items, the actor intended to avoid engaging in some action desired by someone else. In the case of "feeling" items, the actor intended to make the other person feel good or better about something.

An example of an action item is: "You ask John to go with you to see a movie. He already saw it and doesn't want to go. You say, 'I always do what you want to do.'" An example of a deflection item is: "You're studying for a test in school. Lou calls you up and wants to come over and visit. You say 'you picked a fine time to visit.'" An example of a

feeling item is: "Tom is sad because his dog died. You say, 'Cheer up. It's nothing to be upset about. Pretty soon you'll forget all about it.'"

Scoring System

Two scores were obtained for each of the 24 vignettes, these scores tapping the dependent variables of "recognition" and "improvement." A recognition score for each item was obtained by scoring subjects' responses to the probe: "If you said that, could it upset _____?" Improvement scores were obtained by scoring responses to the probe "Can you think of a better way to say that?"

The scoring system can be briefly summarized as follows. For the recognition variable, a score of 0 was given for responses indicating that the portrayed behavior would not upset the other character. A similar score was given if the subject was unable to answer. A score of 1 was given if the subject answered with either a qualified or unqualified "yes" to the question. For the improvement variable, a score of 1 was given if a subject produced a substantially less offensive tactic, which still maintained the original intention of persuading, deflecting or reinforcing the other person. A response received a score of 0 if it merely restated the original ineptitude or failed to measurably improve on it.

RESULTS

The results of the reliability analyses indicated high reliability coefficients for both test-retest and interrater reliability. On the first dependent variable (recognition of inept communication), there was a test-retest reliability coefficient of $r = .86$ and an interrater reliability coefficient of $r = 1.0$. On the second dependent variable

(improvement on inept communication), there was a test-retest reliability coefficient of r = .92 and an interrater reliability coefficient of r = .99.

The main analysis focused on the effects of grade, sex and item content on the two dependent variables. Separate three-way ANOVA's were conducted, one for recognition of and one for improvement on inept communications. Since no significant sex effects were found, on either of the analyses, discussion of the results of the analysis will focus on the effects of grade and item content.

On the recognition variable there was a significant main effect for age ($F=5.6$, df 2,66, $p<.01$), a significant main effect for item type ($F=152.8$, df 2,132, $p<.001$), and a significant grade x item type interaction ($F=9.4$, df 4,132, $p<.001$). Examination of grade means, using the Neuman-Keuls statistic, showed no increase between grades 3 ($\bar{x}=16.4$) and 6 ($\bar{x}=15.2$), but a significant increase ($p<.01$) between grades 6 and 9 ($\bar{x}=18.8$). Examination of item type means showed that scores on feeling items ($\bar{x}=3.5$) were significantly lower ($p<.01$) than were scores on action ($\bar{x}=6.4$) and deflection ($\bar{x}=6.9$) items. Examination of the grade x item type interaction showed that scores on action and deflection items did not increase significantly between grades 3 and 6 or between grades 6 and 9. Scores on feeling items did not, likewise, increase between grades 3 ($\bar{x}=2.9$) and 6 ($\bar{x}=2.4$). There was, however, a significant increase ($p<.01$) between grades 6 and 9 ($\bar{x}=5.2$). It would appear, therefore, that the main effect for grade on the dependent variable of recognition is due almost entirely to the fact that understanding of feeling items develops later than does understanding of action or deflection items. Otherwise, the ability to

recognize that an inept communication is ineffective appears to be well-established by the third grade.

On the improvement variable there was a significant main effect for grade ($F=21.2$, df 2,66, $p<.001$), and a significant main effect for item type ($F=12.0$, df 2,132, $p<.001$). The grade x item type interaction failed narrowly, however, to reach significance at the .05 level. Post-hoc comparisons of grade means showed a significant increase ($p<.01$) between grades 3 ($\bar{x}=10.7$) and 6 ($\bar{x}=16.1$) as well as between grades 6 and 9 ($\bar{x}=21.5$). This suggests that the task of improving upon an inept communication continues to be problematic for many youngsters, even after they have acquired the ability to recognize that a communication is ineffective. Analysis of item type means showed that scores on feeling items ($\bar{x}=4.7$) were significantly lower ($p<.01$) than scores on action items ($\bar{x}=5.6$) and deflection items ($\bar{x}=5.8$). Again, this suggests that inept portrayals of well-intended acts are more difficult for children to analyze effectively than are inept portrayals of acts which are clearly intended to benefit the actor.

DISCUSSION

The results of this study indicate that understanding of inept communication increases in middle childhood and early adolescence, that it is affected by the content of the items which are used to assess it, and that its relationship to age is affected by the type of probe which is asked. In general, it was found that stories involving inept attempts to make others feel better were more difficult for children to understand than were stories involving inept attempts to influence the actions or deflect

the requests of others. This differential was especially noticeable at the third and sixth grade levels.

The greater difficulty level of feeling items may be attributed to a number of factors. Since feelings of others can only be inferred rather than directly observed, thinking about the affective domain involves a greater amount of abstraction that does thinking about the behavioral domain. Therefore, one would expect mastery of this type of content to emerge later, probably around the onset of formal operations. Furthermore, the feeling items involve a conflict between positive intentions (rewarding or cheering up someone) and possible negative outcomes (e.g., hurting someone's feelings) whereas in action or deflection items the intentions are more obviously manipulative and negative, and therefore more likely to suggest possible resentment on the part of the other person. Many children made comments which indicated incredulity over the possibility, for example, that well-intended attempts to cheer someone up could be resented.

The expectation that recognition of ineptness would precede ability to improve on it was supported by the data. There was a monotonic relationship between grade-level and improvement, with significant increases occurring between grades 3 and 6 and, again, between grades 6 and 9. For recognition, there was no increase between grades 3 and 6, and a significant increase only between grades 6 and 9, an increase which was found only for feeling items. An examination of means shows that third-graders were correct in their recognition of ineptness 68% of the time but were able to produce improved communications only 45% of the time. Not until sixth-grade did the ability to improve on inept communications catch up with the ability to recognize ineptness. This suggests that recognition of ineptness may be an important prerequisite of the abiliity to avoid using inept

tactics, but that it is not until early adolescence that youngsters begin to be able to actually use this awareness effectively in their social interactions with others.

The finding that recognition develops before improvement, while consistent with theory and common sense, may be an artifact of the assessment strategy used in this study. The inclusion only of items involving inept behaviors and the use of wording in which the subject was asked if the particular tactic could upset the other person, may have made the dimension of ineptness more salient and may have created a response set which pulled for affirmative answers to that question. In order to correct for that possibility, vignettes involving portrayal of neutral or adept tactics should be added, and subjects should be asked to generate possible consequences, rather than merely confirm the likelihood of negative consequences. If such an assessment approach were used, and if more ambiguous content (such as that contained in the feeling items) were emphasized, it is possible that the ability to anticipate negative interpersonal consequences of inept behaviors might prove to be more difficult and variable than the results of this study suggest. Such a finding would be of special importance for any attempt to examine the relationship of this variable to individual differences in social competence and adjustment, especially in older subjects.

The most interesting thing about this study, in our opinion, is that it represents an initial attempt to study an aspect of social cognition which appears, on the face of it, to be directly linkable to social behavior. While one might question why traditional social cognition variables should be expected to have a direct impact on the way a child actually behaves with others, it is not difficult to make such a connection in the case of

understanding of social ineptness. The ability or inability to correctly anticipate and avoid potentially negative interpersonal consequences would seem to have obvious implications for such behavioral outcomes as peer acceptance and status, aggression, vocational success, etc. It remains to future research, possibly involving the method used here, or some improved variant on it, to determine whether this seemingly obvious prediction is true or not.

References

Bryan, T.H. Social skills and social relationships of learning disabled children. Unpublished manuscript, University of Illinois at Chicago Circle, 1978.

Bryan, T.H. & Bryan, J.H. Some personal and social experiences of learning disabled children. In B.K. Keogh (Ed.), Advances in Special Education (Volume 3). Greenwich, Conn.: JAI Press, in press.

Clark, R.A. & Delia, J.G. The development of functional persuasive skills in childhood and early adolescence. Child Development, 1976, 47, 1008-1014.

Damon, W. Why study social-cognitive development? Human Development, 1979, 22, 206-211.

Endler, N.S. & Magnusson, D. (Eds.), Interactional psychology and personality. New York: Halsted/Wiley, 1976.

Gallagher, J.J. A comparison of brain-injured and non-brain-injured mentally retarded children on several psychological variables. Monographs of the Society for Research on Child Development, 1957, 22.

Greenspan, S. Social intelligence in the retarded. In N.R. Ellis (Ed.), Handbook of mental retardation: Psychological theory and research (Second edition). Hillsdale, N.J.: Erlbaum, 1979.

Greenspan, S. Defining childhood social competence: A proposed working model. In B.K. Keogh (Ed.), Advances in special education (Volume 3). Greenwich, Conn.: JAI Press, in press. (a)

Greenspan, S. Social competence of handicapped individuals: Implications of a proposed model. In B.K. Keogh (Ed.), Advances in special education (Volume 3). Greenwich, Conn.: JAI Press, in press. (b)

Leland, H. Theoretical considerations of adaptive behavior. In W.A. Coulter & H.W. Morrow (Eds.), The concept and measurement of adaptive behavior within the scope of psychological assessment. Austin, Tx.: Texas Regional Resource Center, 1977.

Lerner, J.W. Children with learning disabilities (2nd. ed.). Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1976.

Lewis, R.S., Strauss, A.A. & Lehtinen, L.E. The other child: The brain-injured child (Second edition). New York: Grune & Stratton, 1960.

Mischel, W. & Mischel, H.N. A cognitive social-learning approach to morality and self-regulation. In T. Lickona (Ed.), Moral development and behavior: Theory, research, and social issues. New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1976.

Pervin, L.A. & Lewis, M. (Eds.), Perspectives in interactional psychology. New York: Plenum, 1978.

Platt, J.J., Spivack, G., Altman, N. & Altman, D. Adolescent problem-solving thinking. Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology, 1974, 42, 787-793.

Rutter, M.J. Psychiatry. In J. Wortis (Ed.), Mental retardation: An annual review (Vol. III). New York: Grune & Stratton, 1971.

Shantz, C.U. The development of social cognition. In E.M. Hetherington (Ed.), Review of child development research (Volume 5). Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975.

Shure, M.B. & Spivack, G. Interpersonal cognitive problem solving and primary prevention: Programming for preschool and kindergarten children. Journal of Clinical Child Psychology, 1979, 8, 89-94.

Wiig, E.H. & Semmel, E.M. Learning disabilities in children and adolescents. Columbus, OH: Charles E. Merril, 1976.

Youniss, J. Another perspective on social cognition. In A.D. Pick (Ed.), Minnesota symposia on child psychology (Volume 9). Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1975.

Youniss, J. The nature of social development: A conceptual discussion of cognition. In H. McGurk (Ed.), Issues in childhood social development. London: Methuen, 1978.

Footnotes

1. We wish to express our thanks to Kenyon Chan, Andy Collins, Bonnie Shoultz, Morton Weir, and Edward Zigler for their helpful comments on earlier versions of this paper. Appreciation is expressed to the principals and teachers of the following metropolitan Nashville public schools: Eakin Elementary School, Head School, and Hillwood High School. We are also grateful to University School of Nashville for allowing us to conduct a preliminary pilot investigation.

2. Address correspondence to the ~~first~~ second author at: Boys Town Center for the Study of Youth Development, Boys Town, Nebraska 68010.